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About St Alexis's Meeting with His Father Remarks about One Gesture

The legend of St Alexis is one of the three surviving Polish hagiographical poems from the 15th century. A number of other mediaeval texts are known from the 16th and the 17th centuries in published versions (for example the songs about St Catherine and about St Christopher in the collection *Pieśni postne starożytne*, edited by Sebastian Sternacki and published in 1607–1618). Presumably these epic poems are a small and an accidentally preserved part of an oral genre popular in the so-called “the golden autumn of the Polish Middle Ages”¹. Although the biographical poem about St Alexis is the longest one (it consists of 241 verses and about 40 of them could have been written on the blank page prepared by an anonymous writer), for a long time the Polish scholars involved in mediaeval studies declared its limited, dubious literary value. Especially in comparison with the wealth of versions of the Alexis story in Latin and other European languages, this vernacular legend seemed to be a primitive, monotonous poem devoid of emotions and poetry². However, starting from Ewa Ostrowska's studies, recent years have seen an increasing interest in the legend, and a considerable change in the attitude towards its value has been observed. Teresa Michałowska has highlighted some specific features of the Polish manuscript focusing on the description of the experience of Alexis' parents³. Paweł Stępień carried out an analysis of the

¹ This is a translation of the title of H. Samsonowicz's book on the 15th century culture in Poland.

² Compare for instance an opinion in: S. Vrtel-Wierczyński: *Staropolska legenda o św. Aleksym na porównawczym tle literatur słowiańskich*. Poznań 1937, p. 87. A survey of Polish researchers can be found in: J. Reczek: *Nowy okres w badaniach nad Legendą o św. Aleksym (Z powodu prac Ewy Ostrowskiej i Carlo Verdianiego)*. “Język Polski” 1970, z. 1, pp. 15–21.

³ T. Michałowska: *Średniowiecze*. Warszawa 1995, p. 495.

parent-child relationship, and, from this point of view, he assessed the story as cohesively and sequentially organized⁴. Indeed, the motif of the saint's parents in the Polish legend is of particular interest and the question of how their feelings are presented has to be raised.

The first reaction of the parents to their son's wish to leave is quite clearly indicated in lines 92–93, as the narrator emphasizes their sorrow by means of a parallel repetition: “a ociec w żałości ostał, / i mać miała dosyć żałości (...)”⁵ (“And his father was left in sorrow. / his mother was full of sorrow (...)”)⁶. Besides, a desperate action undertaken by the father to look for his only son is motivated solely by his longing. When his servants bring the message that Alexis has disappeared without a trace, his and his wife's grief explodes:

A gdy (to) ociec usłyszał ta słowa,
tedy jego żalść była nowa.
Tu jął płakać /i/ narzekać,
mać nie mogła płaczu przestać.

When his father heard these words,
His grief began anew;
He began to weep and lament;
His mother could not stop crying.

ll. 142–145

The manifestations of feelings, wholly physical and visible, are however still intensified by an explanation: mother is helpless in the face of despair, and the father's sorrow enhances. This scene undoubtedly increases the emotional tension, but passion finds its stronger expression at the moment of Alexis and Eufemiane's meeting.

This meeting takes place “na żorawiu (...) przed grodem” (“on a drawbridge / Outside the castle”) (“żoraw” is a native noun for a gate, it adds to the local character of the place) and this location will significantly reappear in a detailed description of the father's grief⁷. An unknown beggar turns to

⁴ P. Stępień: *Miedzy miłością do Boga a miłością do bliskich – Legenda o świętym Aleksym*. In: *Literatura i kultura polskiego średniowiecza. Człowiek wobec świata znaków i symboli*. Red. P. Buchwald-Pelcowa, J. Pelc. Warszawa 1995, p. 176.

⁵ All quotations come from: C. Verdiani: *Problemy wzorców polskiej Legendy o świętym Aleksym*. In: *Średniowiecze. Studia o kulturze*. T. 4. Red. J. Lewiński. Wrocław 1969, pp. 136–143, because I will refer to his opinions in the present article. A critical edition: *Polskie wierszowane legendy średniowieczne*. Red. S. Vrtel-Wierczyński, W. Kuraszkiewicz. Wrocław 1962, pp. 136–138.

⁶ All the quotations from the poem come from *Medieval Literature of Poland: an Anthology*. Przeł. M.J. Mikoś. Vol. 82. New York and London 1992, pp. 99–106.

⁷ A. Gieysztor: *Dobrowolne ubóstwo, ucieczka od świata i średniowieczny kult św. Aleksa*. In: *Polska w świecie. Szkice z dziejów kultury polskiej*. Warszawa 1972, pp. 31–32. The author

Eufemiane and he reminds him of his son, Alexis. Carlo Verdiani states that the son's name does not appear in the majority of the canonical versions of St Alexis legend, whereas it is frequently used in folk songs, for example the Russian ones. Surely, recalling the son's name creates the effect of, as Michałowska wrote, "the scene full of dramatic strain". The verbalisation of the son's name suggests a possibility of being recognized by the father. According to Stępień, Alexis even provokes Eufemiane into expressing his overwhelming love for his son. A revelation of the beggar's identity seems to be an undeniably exciting possibility of the plot development.

Aristotle explored recognition as a fundamental way of developing a tragic plot⁸. As a third option he saw a situation, when something that is recollected leads to an expression of emotions; consequently, recognition is possible. However, in this instance, this is not the main character that is "unveiled". Alexis performs in his role till in the end his father experiences a burst of grief. However, the dramatic possibility of recognition still exists in the story, the audience receives every new piece of information with hesitation, in anticipation of the imminent action, which obviously must come. The end is expected to create a maximum increase of tension. Unfortunately, the Polish legend finishes, when Alexis's wife takes a letter from the diseased hand and his true identity is revealed. The story finishes at the beginning of the description of the father's reaction.

In accordance with the rule of plot development, the most dramatic presentation is the one of the parent's reaction to his son's death and to the vicissitudes of his life. The canonical versions of the legend describe in detail the bursts of the inconsolable grief of the father, the mother and at least of the wife. For example, in *The Golden Legend* the father was paralysed in terrible pain, fainted, fell onto the ground and later started to tear out his beard, his hair and to throw himself on the son's body⁹. Physical reactions were accompanied by typical mournful, expressive gestures and lament.

In the Polish version, probably, the scene of lamentation was not amplified so much. According to Verdiani, an old conjugal version of the legend, which was at the origin of the Polish one, had to be quite concise, and some final motives including the funeral, people's adoration, miracles and the burning of the wife in the common tomb were omitted. However, the same author claims, that in the Polish legend fragments of different episodes were mixed, and, as a result Eufemiane's reaction to the meeting with his son and his grief after his death occurred together (lines 171–177). Two arguments point to this conclusion. Firstly, the stories originating from the canonical version do not

even suggests that the meeting could take place in Warsaw, because in 1379 there was a gate called "Żuraw" there.

⁸ Arystoteles: *Poetyka*. Przeł. H. Podbielski. Warszawa 1988, pp. 342.

⁹ J. de Voragine: *The Golden Legend*. Trans. C. Stace. Harmondsworth 1998, pp. 11–15.

describe Eufemiane's giving way to his sorrow during the meeting with the beggar at all, and the stories, in which Alexis's name is mentioned, say that the father cries the most. Secondly, such a great grief is not in proportion to this moment, but is more appropriate for the moment after Alexis's death¹⁰. Is really Eufemiane's sorrow too great?

Jek/k/o ociec to usłyszał,
iż jemu /syna/ jimię wspominał,
tu silno, rzewno zapłakał.
A gdy usłyszał taką mowę,
zawinął sobie płaszczem głowę.
Tu się był weń zamęt wkra/d/ł,
mało (e)że z mostu nie spadł.

When his father heard
That the man mentioned his son's name:
He cried bitter tears,
Keeping him in God's name.
When his father had heard these words,
He covered his head with his coat.
His head began to spin,
And he nearly fell off the bridge.

ll. 171-177

The father's sorrow is expressed again by the motif of tears, in this case amplified by two epithets. The second part of the description presents a dramatic gesture: Eufemiane is covering his head with his coat. This gesture does not appear in the legends which were compared with the Polish one by C. Verdiani¹¹. Symbolic meanings of the gesture are numerous, because the coat can be interpreted as a kind of veil. In the Bible a covering, especially of one's face, was a sign of reverence toward God, the sign of penance and the sign of shame¹². A veil was also a symbol of mourning¹³. In the scene of Eufemiane's grief after Alexis's death, as it is described in the canonical version from *The Golden Legend*, there is not any gesture like this. Maybe in the presence of an unknown beggar, for Eufemiane, who thinks that his son is

¹⁰ C. Verdiani: *Problemy wzorców...*, pp. 121-122.

¹¹ C. Verdiani's list of motifs includes the following deliverances: IT¹ – the oldest Italian version, different from the canonical one, P – French poem from 12th c. belonging to the canonical type, Ashn 4² – English canonical version, B – German version, so close to the Polish one, that they could have the same source.

¹² D. Forstner: *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej* [*The World of Christian Symbolism*]. Warszawa 1990, p. 451.

¹³ For instance in Greek, Jewish, Roman and Christian culture.

dead, it is a form of mourning¹⁴. However, during the meeting on the bridge, covering of the father's head is clearly shown as a spontaneous reaction to the previous words: "A gdy usłyszał taką mowę (...)" ("When his father had heard these words (...)"). The significance of the gesture seems to be fairly obvious: it is a manifestation of suffering and despair. Probably – the way of hiding these emotions; or maybe just both at the same time...

Cicero, in Chapter 22 of his *Orator*, while considering *aptum*, a basic rhetorical concept, provides an example from paintings by way of illustration:

[...] si denique pictor ille vidit, cum immolanda Iphigenia tristis Calchas esset, tristior Ulixes, maereret Menelaus, obvolvendum caput Agamemnonis esse, quoniam summum illum luctum penicillo non posset imitari [...].¹⁵

The same example is given in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. The rhetorician sees the painter's intention to intensify emotions by gradation and covering of the father's face with a coat is for him the best way of expressing the highest emotional tension:

[...] nam quum in Iphigeniae immolatione pinxisset tristem Calchantem, tristiozem Ulixen, addidisset Menelao quem summum poterat ars efficere, maerorem, consumptis affectibus, non reperiens, quo digne modo patris vultum posset exprimere, velavit eius caput, et suo cuique animo dedit aestimandum.¹⁶

The picture painted by Timanthes and described by Cicero and Quintilian is nowadays known from the Pompeyan copy found in "the house of the tragic poet" and is exhibited in the National Archeological Museum in Napoli. The mosaic presents the situation just at the moment of Ifigenia's sacrifice. In the foreground in the left bottom corner prostrated Agamemnon is standing, leaning against the rock. His head is covered with the coat in the gesture of despair (photo 1). The explanation of the gesture in the caption is quite different from the Roman rhetoricians' opinion: Agamemnon simply covers his face because he does not want to watch his daughter dying¹⁷. However, there is no

¹⁴ P. Stępień in his latest study of the legend perceives the gesture differently. He has highlighted the tragic paradox of Eufemiane's love that is spiritually blind and disordered. He supposes that the gesture can be a symbol of his blindness. *Mędzy miłością do Boga a miłością do bliskich. Legenda o św. Aleksym*. In: Idem: *Z literatury religijnej polskiego średniowiecza. Studia o czterech tekstach*. Warszawa 2003, p. 150.

¹⁵ M. Tullius Cicero: *Orator*. Red. O. Jahn. Berlin 1859, p. 74.

¹⁶ M. Fabius Quintilianus: *The institutio Oratoria of Quintilian with an English translation by H.E. Butler*. London 1958, vol. 2, p. 294.

¹⁷ This is not an accurate copy, however the father's figure is similar, what proves a description of the original from Plinius' *Historia naturalis*: "Nam Timanti vel plurimum adfuit in-

doubt that the ancient thinkers correctly pinpointed the painter's intention to create the full expression of people's feelings. The artist's aim was interpreted rhetorically, from the perspective of aptly applied means of influencing the viewers. Rhetorical gradation which can be noticed in the composition skilfully corresponds with the figure of *praeteritio*. As the crucial sense was too intimate and impossible to be expressed directly, the pretherition emphasises it. Besides, relying on the viewers' assumptions it also inevitably increases their emotional involvement. For Cicero and Quintilian the way how the father's despair was presented by the famous Greek painter (the way of expressing the father's feelings which could not have been portrayed by the painter due to the impropriety and even the impossibility of direct presentation) turned out to be an effective method of amplification. In Quintilian's view it was paradoxically the method discovered by art, but as a means of deliberate breaking its rules.

Nevertheless, is it possible to see treatises on rhetoric as a context of the real tradition related to the legend about St Alexis? Adopting this perspective seems to be quite tempting, especially if the problem of reading the works by Cicero and Quintilian in mediaeval Europe and some traces of *Disticha Pseudo Catonis* in the piece of advice given to Alexis's wife are taken into account. Although this assumption appears not to be totally impossible, it leads to a rather speculative hypothesis. Therefore, the aim of this analysis is only a theoretical description of the method, where similarity is indubitable.

After all, the expression of feelings in the scene of the meeting between the father and his son, especially against the background of the two previous descriptions of feelings, appears to be an effect of intensifying emotions, of reaching their upper level. The gesture of covering the father's head with a coat is the expression of the highest emotional intensity, of indefinable despair. Besides, it is a sign of changing the standpoint. This is the only moment, when the anonymous poet is so openly trying to look inside his character: "Tu się był węń zamęt wkradł" ("His head began to spin"). There is when unutterable sadness and grief penetrate the human soul. The same word: "zamęt" is used for describing human's spirit by *Mater Dolorosa* in the most beautiful monologue of Polish mediaeval literature, *Listen, Dear Brothers*:

Zamęt ciężki dostał się mie, ubogiej żenie,
Widzieć rozkrwawione me miłe narodzenie;

Deep sorrow came over me, a miserable woman,
Seeing my dear son covered in blood.¹⁸

ll. 9-10

genii, eius enim est Iphigenia oratorum laudibus celebrata, qua stante ad aras peritura cum maestos pinxisset omnes praecipueque patrum et tristitiae omnem imaginem consumpsisset, patri ipsius vultum velavit, quem digne non poterat ostendere".

¹⁸ *Medieval Literature of Poland...*, p. 77.

Eufemiane, differently, does not see, or rather he can and he is not aware of it, but the audience knows. By the gesture of covering his head with his coat he invites people to participate in his sorrow, which is experienced in solitude and secretly. However, the language of paintings and poetry is different: the gesture in the legend is not the end, but the beginning. Unlike Timanthes, the anonymous poet, after the emotional amplification reached by means of the symbolic gesture, is trying to express the inner experience in words. He transposes emotions to the picture and creates a visual hyperbole (exploiting the context mentioned in line 164): "Tu się był weń zamęt wkradł, / mało eże z mostu nie spadł" ("His head began to spin, / And he nearly fell off the bridge"). In comparison with expressions using the same method that functions in contemporary Polish, like: "myślałem, że spadnę z krzesła, jak (...)" (I thought I would fall off the chair when (...)), this sentence sounds a little awkward. However, it must be seen as something more, almost a suggestion that facing so intense emotions can lead to life hazard¹⁹.

The meeting on the bridge is definitely the scene of "the great grief". Nonetheless, a logical sequence of the beggar's words and the gesture, as well as the gesture and the following description of the inner experience, and finally creating the visual hyperbole by means of the association straightly connected with the place lead to the conclusion that the dramatic description of Eufemiane's sorrow forms an integrated whole. A whole, in which the dramatic order of the story is right. The question about the possible intensification (according to the rules of plot development) seems to be risky. There is no doubt that at the moment of the saint's death conventional funeral motifs connected with the ancient custom of lamentation could be of great help to the author.

Does the lack of such a detailed dramatic description of the father's sorrow at the moment of the meeting with his unrecognized son in the works related to the Polish version of the legend prove that the anonymous poet was an independent creator here? Many studies undertaken by famous mediaeval studies scholars in which they tried to solve the problem of mutual influences and transformations lead to mutually exclusive conclusions based on fragmentary documentary sources. The thesis could be supported only after complete research into the multitude of versions of St Alexis's legend, one of the most popular mediaeval legends in Europe. This article remains only a personal reflection of the reader moved by the incomprehensibility of one gesture and an amazing dramatic tension emphasized in the Polish mediaeval description of a father's sorrow.

¹⁹ P. Stępień writes that at this moment the father "almost loses his consciousness" (*Miedzy miłością do Boga a miłością do bliskich...*, p. 169). W. Wojtowicz in his article *O, Aleksey, Aleksey! O świętej Familianie Kazimierzy Illakowiczówny* ("Polonistyka" 2003, z. 3, p. 152) supposes that the human character of saintliness can be seen only in relation to Alexis's father, especially due to the meeting on the bridge.

Maria Barłowska

O spotkaniu świętego Aleksego z ojcem Uwagi dotyczące jednego gestu

Streszczenie

Autorka, odnosząc się do interpretacji polskiej wersji językowej *Legendy o świętym Aleksym*, podkreślających walory psychologicznego rysunku bohaterów (T. Michałowskiej, P. Stępnia), poddaje analizie scenę anonimowego spotkania świętego z ojcem. Interpretując rozwój fabuły, wyraźnie ukazującej narastanie emocji i związku tego momentu opowieści z kontekstem sytuacyjnym, polemicznie odnosi się do tezy Verdianiego o przemieszczeniu wersów utworu. Zestawienie analizowanej sceny z obrazem Timantesa *Ofiarowanie Ifigenii*, retorycznie interpretowanym w dziełach Cycerona, Kwintyliana, Pliniusza i zastosowaną tam metodą amplifikacji pozwala autorce podkreślić artystyczne mistrzostwo Anonima w ukazaniu rozpaczyny ojca.

Maria Barłowska

Zum Treffen des heiligen Alex mit seinem Vater Erwägungen zum Thema eine Geste

Zusammenfassung

Zu den, die Vorteile des psychologischen Bildes von den Helden hervorhebenden Auslegungen der polnischen Fassung *Legende über den heiligen Alex* (T. Michałowska, P. Stępień) Stellung beziehend, versucht die Verfasserin, die Szene des anonymen Treffens des Heiligen mit seinem Vater zu interpretieren. Nach der Analyse der logischen Handlungsentwicklung, die die Steigerung von Emotionen und den Zusammenhang des Punktes im Roman mit dem Situationskontext genau ausdrückt, polemisiert die Autorin gegen die These von Verdiani über die Verlagerung der bestimmten Verse des Werkes. Die Gegenüberstellung der untersuchten Szene mit dem, in den Werken von Cicero, Quintilian und Plinius rhetorisch interpretierten Bild von Timantes *Iphigenies Opferung* und der dort angewandten Amplifikation erlaubt der Verfasserin, die von Anonym meisterhaft dargestellte Verzweiflung des Vaters hervorzuheben.